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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship of individual differences in peer sociometric status and teacher ratings of disruptive behavior, and preschool boys' emotion displays during conflicts with mixed-sex peers. Sixty 4- and 5-year-old boys from low-income families were videotaped with a small group of classmates in a Head Start preschool classroom. Emotion displays were coded for anger/distress, general positive affect, gleeful taunting, mild negative affect, and neutral affect. The findings indicated that conflicts were more negative in emotional tone at the end than at the beginning of the school year, and that children mirrored each others' emotion displays during conflicts at the end but not the beginning of the year. In addition, gleeful taunting, a form of emotional aggression, more strongly predicted negative peer and teacher assessment than anger-distress, suggesting that anger/distress may be a more appropriate form of emotional expression during conflicts among preschool-age children. (KB)

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Emotional expressiveness during peer conflicts: A predictor of social maladjustment among high-risk preschoolers

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ABSTRACT

Preschool boys' emotion displays during conflicts with mixed-sex peers were related to individual differences in peer sociometric status and teacher ratings of disruptive behavior. Sixty 4- to 5-year old boys from low-income families were videotaped with a small group of classmates in a Head Start preschool classroom. Emotion displays were coded using a coding scheme adapted from Cole, Barrett, & Zahn-Waxler (1992). Results indicated that conflicts were more negative in emotional tone at the end than at the beginning of the school year, and that children mirrored each others' emotion displays during conflicts at the end but not the beginning of the year. In addition, gleeful taunting, a form of emotional aggression, more strongly predicted negative peer and teacher assessments than anger/distress, suggesting that anger/distress may be a more appropriate form of emotional expression during conflicts among preschool-age children.

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INTRODUCTION

Although many have studied causes, resolutions, and content of preschooler's conflicts, less is known about the affective nature and significance of the emotions displayed during such conflicts (Dunn & Brown, 1994; Laursen & Hartup, 1989). Researchers who have examined links between children's styles of emotional expression and peer acceptance (Denham, 1986; Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995), however, have found evidence that highly reactive children may experience more social maladjustment than others (Arsenio & Lover, 1997; Eisenberg, Fabes, Bernzweig, et al., 1993).

Studying individual differences in the emotional components of preschoolers' conflict interactions may elucidate why certain children consistently encounter difficulty in conflicts, are rejected by peers, or lack social skills. As boys from low-income families are found to be at increased risk for such emotional and behavioral problems (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Garner, Jones, & Miner, 1994; McLoyd, Ceballo, & Mangelsdorf, 1997), it is essential to investigate how they negotiate conflicts.

We examined how individual differences in emotion displays during conflicts may over time hinder or facilitate social acceptance by peers and teachers' judgments of appropriate behavior. We hypothesized that children who displayed intense emotions during conflicts would receive more negative assessments from peers and teachers than children who displayed less intense emotions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1a) Which emotions are displayed most often in the context of peer conflict?

1b) How do the emotional dynamics of conflict change over time (i.e., over the course of the school year)?

2) Are high-intensity emotion displays (i.e., intense negative or inappropriate positive affect) associated with negative peer and teacher assessments? Are less intense emotion displays associated with fewer negative assessments?

3) Do children's high-intensity emotion displays predict:

(a) negative peer social status nominations ?

(b) teacher ratings of behavioral disruption?

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

- 60 boys from 8 Head Start preschool classrooms (Ethnicity: 98% white)
- 4-5 years old (Time 1 M = 4.5 yrs; Time 2 M = 5.1 yrs)
- Groups of 4-5 peers (males and females) were videotaped in classroom settings in September (Time 1) and May (Time 2)

Teacher and peer assessments gathered at Time 1 and Time 2

Measures

Definition: Conflict Sequences

- Begin with an initiating event (e.g., pulling a toy away) or protest.
- Terminate when children resolve conflict or leave to pursue a new activity.
- Proportion scores: number of times child displayed an emotion / total number of speech turns (to account for length of conflict and number of conflicts)

Assessment of Emotion Displays

- Emotion displays coded from videotape for every speech turn during a conflict sequence
- Coding scheme adapted from Cole, Barrett, & Zahn-Waxler (1992)
- Reliability: Cohen's Kappa ranged from .81 - 1.0 (M = .91 between 2 coders)

Emotion Display Codes

- Anger/Distress: High energy negative affect; aroused and upset; often reacting to another child (e.g. statements of anger, threats, protests).
- General Positive Affect: excited, happy; shrill or calm tone; toy play or prosocial interaction (e.g. approaching to initiate, touching a child in a friendly way, smiling, laughing).
- Gleeful Taunting: positive affect in context of teasing; sing-songy tone. No negative affect on the part of taunting child (e.g. laughter when knocking down another's block tower, clapping, laughing, otherwise imitating others).
- Mild Negative Affect: Milder in intensity than Anger/Distress; argumentative, confrontational, pouting tone (e.g. saying "no" quietly when blocks are taken, whining /tattletaleing to teacher).
- Neutral Affect: neutral response

Teacher and Peer Assessments of Social Maladjustment.

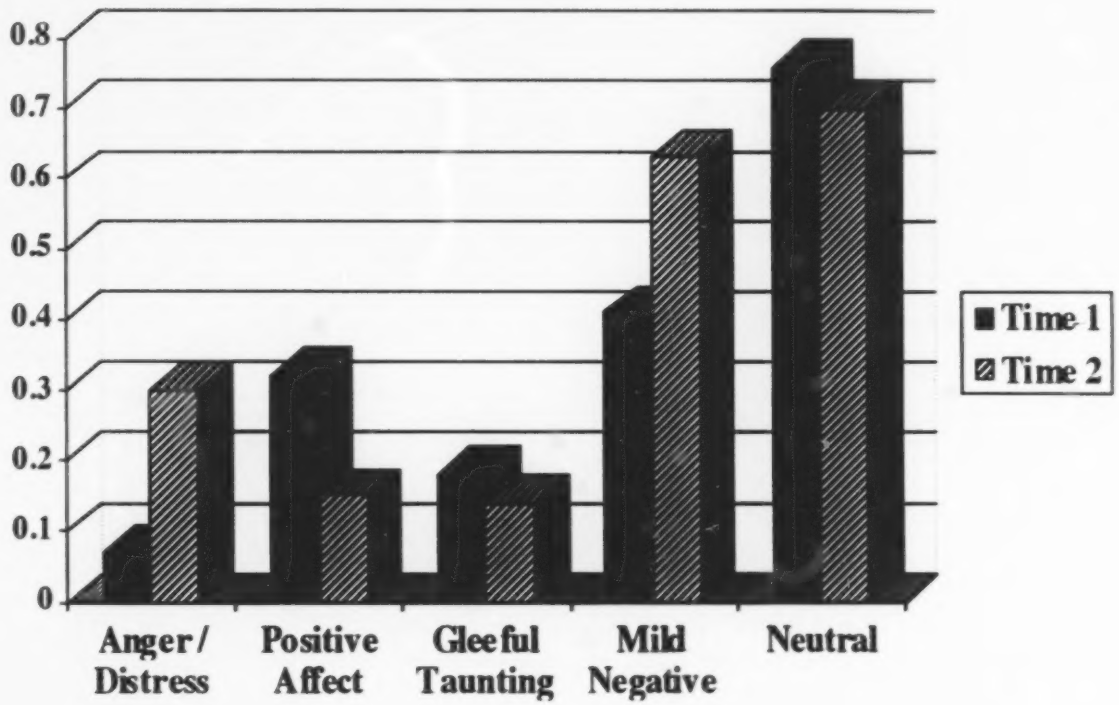
- Conners Teacher Questionaire: Conduct Problems and Hyperactivity Subscales composited to indicate teacher's rating of behavior problems (Goyette, Conners, & Ulrich, 1978).
- Peer Nominations: Children nominated two classmates for aggressive / disruptive behavior (e.g., "who fights a lot?", "who runs around the room?") and who they least liked to play with. Number of negative nominations for each boy were summed.

RESULTS

(1a) Which emotions were displayed most often during conflicts? See Figure 1.

- Neutral and mild negative affect most frequent at Time 1 and Time 2.
- Gleeful taunting least frequent at both timepoints.
- Mild negative affect and anger/distress most frequent at Time 2 than Time 1.
- General positive affect more frequent at Time 1 than Time 2.

Figure 1. Emotions Displayed at Time 1 and Time 2 (Proportion Scores)



(1b) How did emotion displays change across time (i.e. over the course of the school year)? See Table 1.

At Time 1:

- Focal child gleeful taunting was positively correlated with peer displays of anger/distress.
- Focal child neutral displays were positively correlated with peer mild negative affect.

Table 1.

Correlations: Peer and Focal Child Emotions at Time 1 (N=53)

Time 1 Child Emotion	Anger/ Distress	Positive Affect	Gleeful Taunting	Mild Negative	Neutral
Time 1 Peer Emotion					
Anger/ Distress	--	-.11	**.75*** **	--	-.20
Positive Affect	--	.16	-.20	--	--
Gleeful Taunting	.10	--	--	**.26'**	--
Mild Negative	--	--	--	--	**.34** **
Neutral	--	--	-.22	.13	--

Note: ' p<.10. * p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001.

At Time 2:

- Peer and focal child displays of anger/distress, positive affect, gleeful taunting, mild negative affect, and neutral affect all correlate positively.
- Peer gleeful taunting was negatively related to focal child neutral displays.

Table 1 (Continued).

Correlations: Peer and Focal Child Emotions at Time 2 (N=53)

Time 2 Child Emotion	Anger/ Distress	Positive Affect	Gleeful Taunting	Mild Negative	Neutral
Time 2 Peer Emotion					
Anger/ Distress	**.35****	--	.20	-.10	--
Positive Affect	-.15	**.45****	--	--	--
Gleeful Taunting	--	-.14	**.30***	**.23'**	**-.29***
Mild Negative	--	--	--	**.45****	-.22
Neutral	--	--	-.19	--	**.38****

Note: ' p<.10. * p<.05. ** p<.01.

(2) Are high-intensity displays correlated with negative peer and teacher assessments? See Table 2.

- More gleeful taunting at Time 1 was associated with negative peer and teacher assessments at Time 2.
- Time 1 displays of anger/distress were unrelated to peer nominations of negative social status or to teacher ratings of disruptive behavior at Time 2.
- Neutral affect was negatively related to peer and teacher assessments.

Table 2. Correlations: Child Emotions, Peer and Teacher Assessments

Time 1 Child Emotion	Anger/ Distress	Positive Affect	Gleeful Taunting	Mild Negative	Neutral
Teacher Assessments					
Time 1	--	.16	**.39****	.14	**-.27****
Time 2	--	.10	**.33****	.14	**-.25'**
Peer Assessments					
Time 1	--	**.28***	**.38****	**.27***	**-.27***
Time 2	--	.20	**.39****	.18	**-.23'**

Time 2 Child Emotion	Anger/ Distress	Positive Affect	Gleeful Taunting	Mild Negative	Neutral
Teacher Assessments					
Time 2	--	-.17	**.34***	-.13	.06
Peer Assessments					
Time 2	.23	--	.13	--	--

Note: ' p<.10. * p<.05. ** p<.01.

(3a)Do high-intensity emotion displays predict teacher ratings? See Table 3.

- Time 1 anger/distress, neutral affect, and gleeful taunting together accounted for 18% of the variance in teacher ratings of disruptive behavior at Time 2.
- However, gleeful taunting alone was a significant predictor of teacher ratings.

(3b) Do high-intensity emotion displays predict peer nominations? See Table 3.

- Time 1 anger/distress, neutral affect, and gleeful taunting together accounted for 18% of the variance in negative peer nominations at Time 2.
- Gleeful taunting uniquely predicted peer nominations.
- Displays of anger/distress and neutral affect at Time 1 failed to predict peer or teacher negative assessments at Time 2.

Table 3.

Regression: Time 1 Emotion Displays Predicting Time 2 Peer and Teacher Assessments (n = 53)

	Beta	F(3,49)	R^2		Beta	F(3,49)	R^2
Teacher Assessments				Peer Assessments			
Time 1		**2.61'**	.14	Time 1		**3.34***	.18
Anger/Distress	.02			Anger/Distress	-.10		
Neutral Affect	-.16			Neutral Affect	-.15		
Gleeful Taunting	**.28***			Gleeful Taunting	**.34***		

Note: ' p<.10. * p<.05.

CONCLUSION / IMPLICATIONS

Emotion Displays Over Time. Boys mirrored each other's emotion displays at the end, but not the beginning of a school year. Further, conflicts were generally more negative in emotional tone at the end of the year. This implies a dynamic element to emotion displays in preschool peer groups: both emotional intensity and the reciprocal nature of emotional displays during conflict appear to increase significantly over time.

Predicting Peer and Teacher Assessments. Confirming our hypotheses, we found that gleeful taunting predicted peer and teacher assessments of negative social adjustment. Further, low intensity emotions (mild negative, neutral, positive affect) did not predict negative assessments. Contrary to our predictions, anger/distress failed to predict negative assessments.

Summary. Teachers and peers may perceive anger/distress as a more acceptable emotional display than gleeful taunting, even though it is an intense emotion. Anger/distress may be seen as appropriate to the conflict context, whereas gleeful taunting may be seen as a form of emotional aggression. Overall, we found that intense emotional displays can indeed predict social adjustment, but that such displays must be interpreted depending on the context of children's social interactions.